



# Transit Feasibility Study Executive Summary

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by

St. Croix County Transit Subcommittee

with assistance from

West Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission



## **St. Croix County Transit Subcommittee**

Chair: Dave Ostness, Supervisor  
Paulette Anderson, Supervisor  
Scott Nelson, Supervisor

Brad Beckman, ADRC  
Julie Bergstrom, City of River Falls  
Tracy Davis, ADRC  
Peg Gagnon, BRIDGE For Community Life, Inc.  
Brian Halling, St. Croix County Highway Department  
Denise Larson, CILWW  
Tim Ramberg, St. Croix County Highway Department

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## **Executive Summary**

### **What is the St. Croix County Transit Feasibility Study and why was it done?**

In 2015, a Transit Study Subcommittee of St. Croix County's standing Transportation Committee was formed. The Subcommittee received a Federal Transit Administration planning grant, through the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, and contracted with West Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission to conduct a study considering the feasibility of transit services within St. Croix County and between the County and frequented destinations in neighboring communities. St. Croix County has been undergoing very significant growth, largely due to proximity to the Twin Cities, for most of the last four decades. A combination of the resulting development in the western half of the County, along with increasing demand for transportation alternatives from millennials and aging baby boomers, countywide, have brought the County to a tipping point prompting a need to examine the transit services and how they might be appropriate in St. Croix County.

This study examines existing travel patterns and services in and around St. Croix County, considers alternatives for types of service appropriate to identified transit needs, and makes recommendations for funding and implementation of those services deemed most suitable. By engaging in this planning process, St. Croix County is laying the foundation for garnering funds and implementing a reasonable, efficient, and effective transit service, a service that will begin serving today's needs and adjust to changing needs in the future.

### **How was the public involved?**

Public involvement is integral to the development of this study. With the dual goal of gathering input from, and disseminating information to, the public we were able to better gauge interest and needs. But, also, this type of interaction can assist in eventual implementation of the plan's recommendations by garnering public and political support. The planning process included an online survey, along with some hardcopy versions that were then entered into the online survey tool and included in the analysis. In addition to analysis of this information in the Analysis section of the report, survey results can be viewed in Appendices A and D. The survey confirmed much of the census data which will be noted later in this summary and showed substantial interest in utilizing transit services. The process also included two public open house input sessions, one early in the process to gather input and promote involvement, and one later to gather public opinion on the alternatives under consideration. There was a great deal of outreach to meetings and events held around the county, including Towns Association, county committees, the county fair, and others. The county website and local newspapers were also used to keep the public abreast of upcoming meetings, and to review the draft document.

### **What is the current transportation situation in St. Croix County?**

The Existing Condition and Data Review section includes a great deal of detailed information on the existing services and vehicles within the County, including: client-based services (such as Veterans Services, Bridge for Community Live, and care facilities); school busing, publicly funded transit services in River Falls and New Richmond and county-wide elderly and disabled services; and privately funded services such as taxi services private privately funded medical facility services for

patients. In short, the only services that are currently available to the general public are the shared ride taxi systems in the cities of River Falls and New Richmond. Most of the other services operate for a designated group and/or for designated purposes, many with little to no coordination with other services. Details on services and vehicles can be found in Exhibits 1a and 1b, on pages 4 and 5. Also noted in the Existing Conditions and Data Review section are a discussion of Twin Cities Metro Transit's Ridematch and vanpooling programs, which currently includes over seven hundred participants from St. Croix County in the online matching database (pp. 6-7), and the locations of existing and currently planned park and ride lots in the County. Summaries of county, municipal, and other area plans, as they address transit-related topics through goals or recommendations, are also included, (pp. 9-12). Several municipal plans and the County's comprehensive plan include goals and objectives related to the development and expansion of transit services to deal with high traffic levels and access needs.

A detailed discussion of the County's demographics, including comparisons of several data items to state and federal data, is included in this section. Overall, St. Croix County's population is slightly younger than both states of Wisconsin and Minnesota, as well as the nation, however, there is still a large group of baby boomers that are reaching ages where difficulties and inability to continue driving are more common. The County also has a significantly lower incidence of persons below 50% of the poverty level, 11.9 percent of the population, compared to 21.8 percent in the State of Wisconsin, and 25.2 percent nationally, though there are several jurisdictions within the County that stand out as higher than the state (21.8%), including the (entire) City of River Falls (29.4%), the Village of Woodville (23.0%), and the City of New Richmond (22.0%). Not surprisingly, considering the higher level of affluence and the lack of alternative modes, household vehicle ownership rates are higher in St. Croix County than in the State as a whole, and the nation. Only 3.8 percent of households do not own a vehicle, compared to 7.1 percent in Wisconsin, and 9.1 percent nationwide.

### What does it all mean?

The Analysis section of the St. Croix County Transit Feasibility Study included three types of analysis: an analysis of travel data, analysis of the public survey data, and a peer analysis. The travel data analysis looks in detail at commuting patterns. Of workers who reside in St. Croix County, approximately forty-four percent have a work destination in Minnesota. Thirty percent work within St. Croix County, but outside the municipality in which they live, while twenty-two percent live and work in the same town, village, or city. The remaining four percent work in neighboring Wisconsin counties, (p. 21). There is a great deal of commuting between communities within the county, most prominently between the cities of Hudson, New Richmond, and River Falls. Detailed tables showing this information, as well as all the commuting patterns between all of the St. Croix County cities, villages, and towns, can be found in Appendix C.

Much of the data gathered from the public survey supports data extracted from the Bureau of the Census tabulations. Beyond the census data, the survey gathered participants' opinions and expectations of transit services, most notably including their likelihood to use transit services. While ninety percent of the respondents currently drive along to their most frequent destination, usually work, 35 percent responded that they would use a 'convenient and economical' transit service at least two or more times per week, with over half of those (20.3%) anticipating the use of transit nearly every time they make that trip. For trips other than their most frequent trip (shopping, social, medical, etc.), 50 percent of respondents said that they would use such a transit service

either ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’, with another 26 percent responding that they would maybe use transit occasionally for those less frequent trips. The top five reasons that respondents would choose to use transit included: to save money; to save gas, to improve the environment; to use my time more productively while travelling; and to avoid driving, biking, or walking in poor weather conditions.

The peer analysis (pp. 25-33) reviews seven systems from around Wisconsin that likely have some similar characteristics to St. Croix County, or that are providing a service that St. Croix County might consider in an environment similar to St. Croix County. That being said, each ‘peer’ has its unique situations and no two provide the same service. Each system within the state is different in terms of type of service(s) that make up each system, and how it is provided and managed. The services included in the peer analysis and a summary of each below. For more specific information on each system and a comparison of operating performance, see pp. 25-33 in the full report.

### Peer Analysis Summary

Service Name	Type of Service	General Service Area	Annual ridership (2014)	Contracted provider?	Administrator
<b>Scenic Mississippi Regional Transit (SMRT)</b>	fixed routes (3); shared ride taxi (C. Prairie du Chien)	Crawford, Vernon, and LaCrosse cos.	33,244	yes, private	City of Prairie du Chien
<b>Bay Area Rural Transit (BART)</b>	fixed routes (2); deviated fixed route (C. Ashland); demand response (C. Washburn)	Bayfield and Ashland counties	150,410	no	BART Transit Commission
<b>Dunn County Transit</b>	fixed route (2); demand response for elderly & disabled (C. Menomonie)	City of Menomonie	182,000	no	Dunn County Transit Commission
<b>Western Kenosha County Transit (WKCT)</b>	fixed route (2 M-F); fixed route (MWF) or (TTh) btwn rural communities; demand response to meal sites	Western Kenosha Co., connecting to City of Kenosha Transit and to Metra commuter rail in Antioch, IL	13,352	yes - to private non-profit	Kenosha Co. ADRC
<b>Door County Transit</b>	deviated fixed routes (5); paratransit; shared ride taxi	Door County	65,626	yes - private, and private non-profit	Door Co. Dept. of Human Services
<b>Namekagon Transit</b>	deviated fixed routes (3 in western Sawyer Co.); demand response (Barron, Sawyer, and Washburn cos.);	Barron, Sawyer, and Washburn cos.	79,669	yes, private non-profit	Namekagon Transit (priv. non-profit)
<b>Rusk County Transit Commission</b>	deviated fixed route (2 in rural county); demand response (Ladysmith)	Rusk Co.	66,295	no	Rusk County & Transit Commission

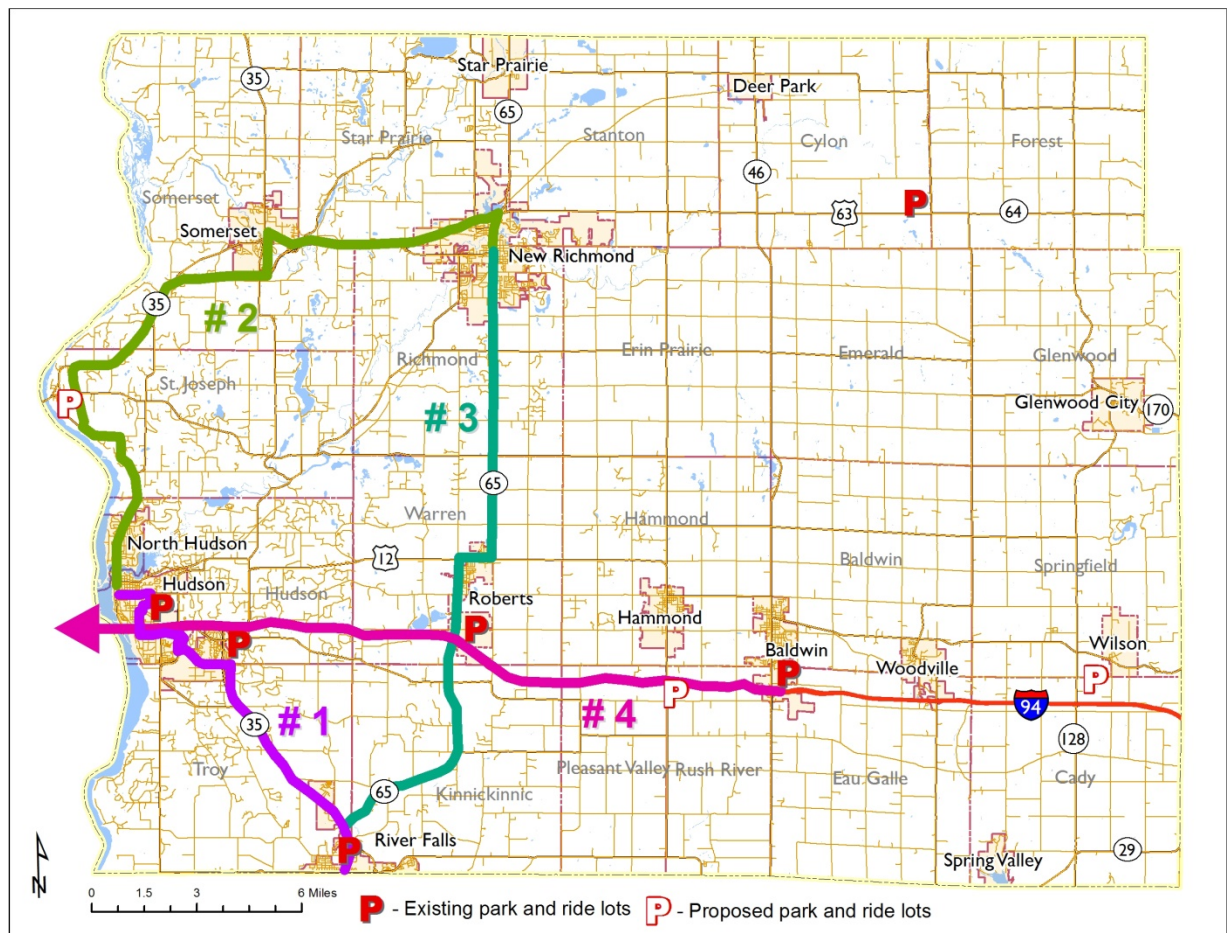


## What are some ways to provide transit services in St. Croix County?

The Alternatives section in the full study looks at several types of transit service that could be potentially be implemented in St. Croix County. These include fixed route service, which is a service that is provided on a regularly scheduled timetable, on an assigned route, most often with designated signed stops where riders can board or exit the vehicle. Fixed routes are most often seen in urban areas with a high population and trip density, but can also work in less dense areas connecting two or more areas of concentrated trip origins (residences) and destinations (work places, schools, shopping, medical centers, etc.). Service needs to be frequent and reliable so that riders feel confident that they will be able to utilize the route to get where they are going on time, and return without too much inconvenience. The areas where fixed routes would be viable include: a route between Hudson and River Falls, a route between New Richmond and Hudson, and a route between New Richmond and River Falls.

A fourth fixed route is also addressed to serve those commuting between St. Croix County and the Twin Cities area. This route would require considerable coordination with, and buy-in from, Twin Cities Metro Transit. A single trip between St. Croix County, likely Baldwin and park and ride lots west, and downtown St. Paul, with limited stops at major employment centers enroute, would result in the best performing route design. Ridership would suffer significantly if transfers were required along the corridor. All of the fixed route alternatives are shown on the map, below. They can be found in further detail on pages 36-41 in the full document.

### Fixed Route Alternatives



While the density of trips necessary to justify fixed route service does not exist in the rural portions of the County, another type of service, known as shared ride taxi, is better suited to areas where origins and destinations are widely scattered, or where ridership is too low to justify fixed routes. Shared ride taxi service is a door-to-door service, reserved in advance, while seeking to improve efficiently through the transportation more than one rider when possible. This is similar to a service that is currently provided for senior and for those with disabilities through the ADRC, but it would, in this case, serve the general public. Due to the higher level of service and the typically longer trip distances, this type of service has higher per trip costs, which is typically reflected in rider fares that are higher than a typical fixed route service, usually between three to ten dollars, sometimes varying based on the trip distance. The following table shows a rough planning level estimation of operating costs for the fixed route service.

### Planning Level Cost Estimates for Fixed Routes #1, #2, and #3

Routes	Minutes Per Round Trip	Bus Cost Per Hour	Round Trips Per Day (Mon.-Fri.)	Round Trips Per Day (Sat.)	Service Hours per Week	Cost Per week	Cost Per Year	Annual Projected Fare Box Revenue (10% of total costs)	Anticipated Funding from State and Federal Sources (55% costs minus fare box revenue)	Estimated Local Match Required (total cost minus fare box revenue and State/Federal funding)
#1: Hudson-River Falls	60	\$50.00	12	10	70	\$3,500	\$182,000	\$18,200	\$90,090	\$73,710
#2: New Richmond-Hudson	90	\$50.00	8	6	69	\$3,450	\$179,400	\$17,940	\$88,803	\$72,657
#3: New Richmond-River Falls	90	\$50.00	8	6	69	\$3,450	\$179,400	\$17,940	\$88,803	\$72,657
Total					208	\$10,400	\$540,800	\$54,080	\$267,696	\$219,024

Other alternatives considered in the planning process include a **volunteer driver** program, which can provide service to fill gaps in the system with more flexibility in terms of service hours and service area; **rideshare and vanpool** programs, which currently exist through St. Croix County for those who either live or work in the Twin Cities and area accessible through an online matching program; **park and ride lots** providing a convenient location for meeting up with carpools or accessing fixed routes; and passenger rail which may become a the relatively near future (less than 5 years?) through the efforts of the West Central Wisconsin Rail Coalition to establish service through a public-private partnership with four round trips per day on the Union Pacific line between Eau Claire and St. Paul with stops likely in Menomonie, Baldwin, Hudson, and Stillwater. Should the passenger rail service come to fruition, it would likely negate the need for fixed route #4. The Coalition is currently in discussions with the railroad to determine operating and capital needs along the corridor.

The full study also discusses the alternatives for governing and managing transit services in the County, including the benefits of establishing a transit commission, general staffing or contracting, as well as options for meeting vehicle, and other capital needs such as a maintenance/storage facility, bus stop, shelters, etc.

## What would work best in St. Croix County and how would we proceed?

Prior to implementing services, it is important that decisions are made concerning the governance and administration of the services. Once the governance and administrative issues are addressed, some service recommendations could be implemented in the short term, or as quickly as the County can acquire needed capital, funding, and service agreements to operate. Other services would either take more time to establish, or could be started later based on the performance of earlier phases. Once a service is in place, it needs to be run in a consistent and dependable manner, with any changes or adjustments made only after serious consideration and clear two-way communication with the public. The service must win and retain riders with convenient and dependable operation.

Recommended services include fixed routes #1, #2, and #3, as shown on the previous page, continuous effort to collaborate with Metro Transit to provide a reliable service similar to that shown in fixed route #4, either through public, or a public-private partnership. In the short term, the study recommends aggressive promotion of the existing rideshare and vanpool program to encourage the use of these options for commuters to the Twin Cities. Also, shared ride taxi service, county-wide, is recommended, coordinating with fixed routes to avoid duplicative service.

Capital recommendations include the purchase or lease of small (max. 15 person capacity, including the driver) buses. Federal capital funding has become scarce, so conversations and application should be entered into with WisDOT, as soon as decisions are made to move ahead. Buses should be ADA accessible, include bicycle carriers, and ultimately be equipped with WI-FI for passenger use. Used vehicles may also be available to start service sooner than new vehicles could be acquired.

Vehicle storage/maintenance facility needs will vary depending on ownership of vehicles by the County, or by a private provider, however some sort of facility will likely be required in either case. This could be an existing facility, such as highway department garage, and should be centrally located to minimize deadhead miles for the buses. It is critical that vehicles are kept clean and in good repair at all times, to encourage and keep riders. Shelters can be added as ridership patterns show where the busier pick-up locations occur. Park and ride lots are likely locations, as transfers between different travel modes are certain to occur at those locations.

If there is a determination that St. Croix County would like to proceed with the development of a transit system like, or similar to, that discussed above, the table on the following page displays a suggested action plan to assist in that effort by addressing approximate timing and responsibilities for significant milestones in the setup process. Those actions noted as 'immediate' are really those that could begin at any time, but are needed to occur prior to other activities. 'Short-term' activities are those that should be taken on early in the process, likely within the first six months to a year, depending upon the anticipated schedule for instituting the services. In many cases, action items can, and sometimes should, be taken on concurrently. The desired kick-off date and the availability of grant funding will likely determine the timing of those items listed as 'mid-term'. The 'long-term' items are those that could wait until after service is in place. 'On-going' activities note just a few of the things that need to be attended to on a regular basis, as service is provided.

While a full implementation of the proposed services would be the best way to incur the benefits of a fully integrated system, the County may determine a need to phase in services, or build on the existing services to lay stepping stones toward a fully-functioning system. If a phase-in of services is necessary, it is recommended that the **first phase** include a strong promotion of Metro Transit's Ridematch and



Vanpool programs, as well as the implementation of fixed route #1, between Hudson and River Falls. Route #1 has the greatest ridership potential of the three internal routes. It is also a more 'visible' route that can help to gain support for further expansion. It should be noted, however, that none of the fixed routes will meet their full potential until they are all well-established and can feed each other through transfers and service coordination. **Phase two** could include the remaining routes #2 and #3. These two routes should be established together, joining Route #1. The routes will need to be well coordinated to allow for transfers between routes and convenient time points that serve riders to major destinations. If riders cannot arrive at their destinations when needed, ridership will suffer dearly. In a **third phase**, the expansion of shared-ride taxi service to the general public, county-wide, could be established, if it is necessary to delay its start. Current services for Elderly and Disabled riders in the County, provided by ADRC, would stay in place through the earlier phases, and transform into a service that is clearly intended for all riders, rebranded and marketed as a general public shared-ride taxi service. It is critical that it continue to be an accessible service as much of the ridership will continue to be the elderly and persons with disabilities.

### Proposed Action Plan for Full Establishment of Transit Services

Action	Timeline	Responsible Entities
Plan completion	immediately	Transportation Committee/County Board
Begin discussions with WisDOT	immediately	Transit Subcommittee/Transportation Committee
Market Rideshare and Vanpool services (working with Metro Transit)	immediately	Transit Subcommittee/Metro Transit
Establish governing and administrative structure (Transit Commission/staff/physical location/capital ownership/maintenance/fare systems, etc.)	short term	Transit Subcommittee/County Board
Hire or assign duties to Transit Manager or contract with an interim manager to assist with setup (as determined)	short term	Transit Commission/County Board
Meet with existing service providers to determine coordination needs/desires	short term	River Falls/New Richmond/ADRC/Commission
Estimate budget for 1st year (operating and capital)	short term	Commission/Committee/County Board
Work with WisDOT on federal/state grant application	short term	Commission/Transit Manager
Seek out vehicles (used or new, as needed)	short term	Commission/Transit Manager
Determine service specs and write RFP(s)	mid-term	Transit Manager/Commission/County Board
Issue RFP(s) for provision of service	mid-term	Commission/Transit Manager
Conduct selection process	mid-term	Selection Committee
Meet with top provider to negotiate contract, establish service and administrative details	mid-term	Commission/Transit Manager
Approve contract	mid-term	County Board
Meet with cities & major generators to locate major stops	mid-term	Commission/Transit Manager
Market services	mid-term	Commission/Transit Manager/Service Provider
Launch services	mid-term	Transit Manager/Service Provider
Continue marketing efforts	ongoing	Commission/Transit Manager/Service Provider
Monitor service performance	ongoing	Commission/Transit Manager/Service Provider
Determine need for shelters/signage/fare delivery options/other capital needs	long-term	Transit Manager/Commission
Apply for capital grant (for determined needs)	long-term	Transit Manager/County Board
Apply for vehicle replacement grants as needed	ongoing	Transit Manager/Commission/County Board
Monitor service needs and fluctuations	ongoing	Transit Manager/Commission